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Review of The West of the Imagination

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The West of the Imagination. By William H. Goetzmann and William N. Goetzmann. New York: Norton, 1986. Illustrations, notes, index. xviii + 458 pp. \$34.95.

This is—in every meaning of the word—a wonderful book. Historian William H. Goetzmann, the author of *Exploration and Empire*, *Karl Bodmer's America*, and *New Lands, New Men* has collaborated with his art historian son, William N. Goetzmann, to produce this volume, a companion to the Public Broadcasting System series of the same name. Focused on the illustrators, painters, and photographers of the American West, it offers a stunning overview of their histories, actions, and, most especially, their images. The reader, like the artists and the Goetzmanns themselves, is awed by the felt pull of the West on the imagination; the artists created, as the authors say, "many Wests," which, when taken together, "underscore the importance of myth." More specifically, they write: "the awesome Western landscape and the incredible historic experiences that rise up in our collective memories like ghosts from some vivid past have provided inspiration not only for generations of artists, but also for generations of Americans, red, brown, and white. Thus the West lives on, even today, in the hearts of most Americans" (433, 434).

It certainly must, since the publishers have spared little expense in publishing *The West of the Imagination*; it is generously and beautifully illustrated, with the images well keyed to this

text. And unlike the texts of many such art books this repays careful reading, as the authors move smoothly from Charles Willson Peale and George Catlin—whom the Goetzmanns aptly call "the Leatherstocking of American Art" (16)—to Georgia O'Keeffe, Hollywood's cowboys, and Norman Rockwell. Divided into six parts made up of several thematically linked chapters each, the sections cohere nicely. Each chapter offers assessments that are factual, sensible, and reasonably thorough. The authoritative tone belies a wealth of information, for the authors make their analysis seem easy even though their breadth of coverage shows that it is not. Even so, the scholar will be frustrated by the short shrift accorded many figures, since one often turns a page, expecting more, only to find a new chapter. The notes are largely attributive, although the major individual studies are cited, so a reader may use this book to look further. Thus focused on a general audience, *The West of the Imagination* provides an extremely cogent *tour d'horizon* and, considering the breadth of the western horizon, that is saying quite a bit. Like the Goetzmanns, the reader emerges full of wonder over the various and beautiful images spawned by the western horizon. A wonderful book indeed.

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